

## **Indicator: Mercury Emissions (316)**

Mercury is an element that is naturally found in the environment. However, many industrial processes, such as coal combustion, waste incineration, and certain chemical manufacturing operations, have increased the amounts of mercury released to the air. Because mercury does not degrade in the environment, most mercury that is emitted to the atmosphere will eventually deposit to the ground or onto water bodies.

Through a series of chemical transformations and environmental transport processes, which Indicator 038 describes in much greater detail, the airborne mercury that deposits to the Earth's surface can eventually accumulate in fish tissue, most profoundly in those fish species near the top of the food chain (e.g., shark, swordfish). People who eat mercury-contaminated fish are at risk for various health effects. Health risks are greatest for the developing fetus, as high mercury exposures among pregnant women can cause impaired neurological development in the fetus. (Mercury Study Report to Congress Volumes I to VII, EPA 452-R-96-001b) For further information on how mercury cycles in the environment and additional human health risks, refer to [the Mercury Thread].

This indicator presents mercury emissions data tracked by the National Emissions Inventory (NEI). The NEI is a composite of data from many different data sources, including industry and numerous state, tribal, and local agencies. Different data sources use different data collection methods, and many of the emissions data are based on estimates rather than actual measurements. Emissions are tracked for stationary point and non-point sources as well as onroad and non-road mobile sources. NEI data have been collected since 1990 and cover all 50 states and their counties, D.C., the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands, and some of the territories of federally-recognized American Indian nations. Data for mercury emissions are currently available only for the years 1990 and 1999.

**What the Data Show (NEI data for 2002 will be added to this indicator once they are available in final form).**

Figure 316-1 shows how estimated nationwide air emissions of mercury have changed from 1990 to 1999, according to the NEI. During this time frame, annual nationwide emissions decreased from 210 tons to 113 tons—a total decrease of 46% that is attributed primarily to decreased emissions from medical waste incinerators and municipal solid waste combustors.

### **Indicator Limitations**

- The emissions data in this indicator are primarily based on estimates, not direct measurements. Although these estimates have inherent uncertainties, the data have been generated using well-established estimation methods.
- The trend shown is based on nationwide aggregate data. Emissions trends on local scales will depend largely on changes at the nearest emissions sources.
- Not all states and local agencies provide the same data or level of detail for a given year.

### **Data Sources**

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. National Emissions Inventory - <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/neidata.html>

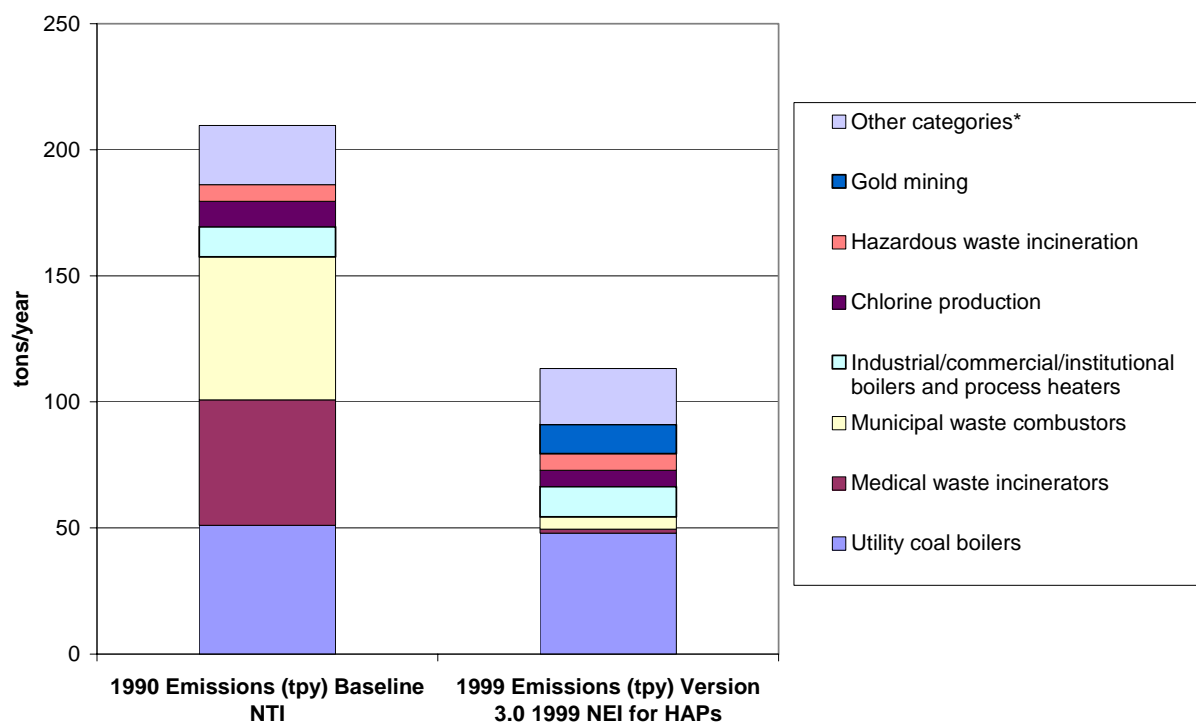
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. 1999 National Emission Inventory Documentation and Data - Final Version 3.0. (<http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/1999inventory.html>)

## References

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Mercury Study Report to Congress Volumes I to VII, EPA 452-R-96-001b. Washington, DC: Office of Air Quality Planning and Standards, 1996.  
<http://www.epa.gov/mercury/report.htm>.

## Graphics

**Figure 316-1. Mercury emissions, 1990 & 1999**



## R.O.E. Indicator QA/QC

**Data Set Name:** MERCURY EMISSIONS

**Indicator Number:** 316 (89077)

**Data Set Source:** EPA National Emissions Inventory

**Data Collection Date:** ongoing: 1990-present

**Data Collection Frequency:** varies from annually to triennially

**Data Set Description:** Mercury Emissions

**Primary ROE Question:** What are the trends in outdoor air quality and effects on human health and ecological systems?

### Question/Response

**T1Q1** Are the physical, chemical, or biological measurements upon which this indicator is based widely accepted as scientifically and technically valid?

Yes. While the NEI is a composite of data from many different data sources and methods, most of which are estimates instead of actual measurements with associated precision and accuracy, the methods are widely accepted as technically valid. These methods are considered largely sufficient in their application to derive the indicator data and conclusions presented to the typical user of the ROE. The NEI contains annual emissions (units = tons/year) of the criteria pollutants and the hazardous air pollutants (HAPs) noted in the Clean Air Act Amendments of 1990 (CAAA). The methods used to develop the NEI pollutant data vary by source sector and involve multiple data sources. A general description of methods by source sector is included below. Source emissions can be measured using monitoring equipment or estimated by using emission factors and emission process activity levels. Mathematical models may be used to characterize and simulate emissions that are influenced by several variables. For most source types, estimation techniques are the most practical. The NEI emissions are grouped into four main source sectors: Point sources and NonPoint sources (these are also referred to as stationary sources) and Onroad Mobile and Nonroad mobile sources (these are referred to as mobile sources). The Point source sector contains data on individual industrial, commercial and institutional facilities and is further divided into two subsectors: Electric Generating Units (EGUs) and NonEGUs. For the NEI sector data that is collected from state and local agencies - they either gather the data from their facilities or estimate the emissions themselves, using average and industry-specific emission factors. Some of the techniques they may use to generate their point and nonpoint estimates are referenced in a guidebook of methods which is endorsed by the EPA and the state and local agencies (STAPPA/ALAPCO). The guidebook of methods is located on

<http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/eiip/techreport/>. Depending on the source sector and the pollutants of interest, the EPA uses other data sources in addition to the data received by the state and local agencies. Those other data sources, where applicable, are generally described below by sector, and identified specifically in the EPA's Preparation Plan for the 2002 NEI, located on <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/2002inventory.html>. In addition to identifying the data sources, the NEI 2002 Preparation Plan also describes the EPA's current method of quality checking the different data sources, and blending and merging among them, as well as augmenting data in order to complete the data set over space and time for specific source sectors and pollutants. The EPA Preparation Plan for the 1999 NEI ([http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/nei\\_plan\\_feb2001.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/nei_plan_feb2001.pdf)) describes the data sources and process used to compile the 1999 HAP data which is included in the indicator. There is a triennial development effort and focus on compiling data for the NEI which results in the most complete national emissions inventory data every third year. For the criteria emissions in the NEI, data is also developed for the years in between the 3-year inventory cycles. For some sectors and pollutants, the methods used may be the same as those applied for the 3-year inventory, or the data may be extrapolated from the most recent third year inventory using economic projections or more simply as a mathematical interpolation between previous and subsequent years of record. While the NEI is a composite of data from many different data

sources and methods, most of which are estimates instead of actual measurements with associated precision and accuracy, the methods are widely accepted as technically valid. These methods are considered largely sufficient in their application to derive the indicator data and conclusions presented to the typical user of the ROE.

**T1Q2** Is the sampling design and/or monitoring plan used to collect the data over time and space based on sound scientific principles?

There is not a sampling design per se for the overall NEI data development project, at least not in the typical terms of a statistical sampling design. The data methods are predominantly based on estimation techniques rather than measurement techniques with associated precision and accuracy and standard error. For most sector data, emission factors are used with average emission process rates and average activity indicators to estimate typical emissions expected from similar processes in different geographical areas. Emission factors typically are based on emission testing or other sampling observations of sources and are generally developed and revised as need arises and more data becomes available. Highway vehicle emissions factors, however, are based on relatively recent research-driven sampling approaches that are documented in information collection plans implemented by the EPA's Office of Transportation and Air Quality Planning (<http://www.epa.gov/otaq/ap42.htm>). For onroad mobile sources, estimates are made by month or by season to account for typical temperatures and fuel properties. Estimates of vehicle miles traveled are based on the United States Department of Transportation (US DOT) Highway Performance Monitoring System, which makes use of a formal sample panel of roadway segments. Like onroad mobile sources, emissions from some other processes are estimated for time periods less than annual. As an example, pollutant emissions for seasonal processes are estimated for only a portion of the year in which they occur (i.e., winter burning season). The NEI attempts to capture the full universe of large point source facilities, which are closely monitored and located individually by the state and local agencies. Most Point EGU emissions are individually measured with continuous monitoring devices. These data are summarized to annual average emissions for all 50 states and their counties, D.C., the U.S. territories of Puerto Rico and Virgin Islands, and as available, for some of the territories of federally-recognized American Indian nations, and are widely used and accepted as an indicator of national and regional emission trends over time.

**T1Q3** Is the conceptual model used to transform these measurements into an indicator widely accepted as a scientifically sound representation of the phenomenon it indicates?

The annual emissions are directly estimated in most cases, or are simply totaled from monthly or seasonal estimates - there is no transformation.

**T2Q1** To what extent is the indicator sampling design and monitoring plan appropriate for answering the relevant question in the ROE?

The NEI is designed to explicitly answer the question posed in the ROE. This indicator estimates emissions from all anthropogenic sources of a primary air pollutant.

**T2Q2** To what extent does the sampling design represent sensitive populations or ecosystems?

The emission estimates that comprise the NEI are non-specific for sensitive populations or ecosystems. Rather, the data are specific for types of emission processes and as such, are representative of how much and where those process emissions occur by county for the nonpoint sources and by individual facility location for the point sources.

**T2Q3** Are there established reference points, thresholds or ranges of values for this indicator that unambiguously reflect the state of the environment?

This indicator(s) directly addresses changes in air pollutant emissions from year-to-year and the contributions of various types of emissions sources, by county, and for every state. Air pollutant emissions are a reliable gauge of impact on the environment and when considered along with air quality transport and transformation issues, are the foundation for air quality analysis, including health indicators. Emission reductions generally indicate positive impact on air quality. Average annual pollutant emission trends over time may also reference a specific year or years in the time series, during which emission reductions were realized due to previous year implementation of federal, regional, or local control and compliance programs. There are no thresholds or ranges of values associated with safe levels of emissions for this indicator.

**T3Q1** What documentation clearly and completely describes the underlying sampling and analytical procedures used?

The NEI is a composite of many data sources, much of which is provided by state and local agencies and comes to EPA with little or no documentation on the specific methods used to generate the estimates. An emission inventory guidebook of methods, which is endorsed by the EPA and the state and local agencies (STAPPA/ALAPCO), is generally used by state and local agencies as reference for acceptable methods. The guidebook of methods is located on <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/eiip/techreport/>. For emissions that are reported by the states as direct measurements from monitoring devices, the analytical procedures are referenced on <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/emc/>. Documentation of the procedures that EPA used to compile the NEI data for some of the more recent years in the time series is located on <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/neidata.html> and is more organized and descriptive than documentation for previous year data. Documentation for the earlier years noted in the time series is located on <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/trends/procedures/neiproc99.pdf>. Some of the methods noted have subsequently been revised for specific processes and years as EPA has gone back to update and apply improved methods. The documentation sources noted above will also describe use of emission factors. Documentation on process specific emission factors and how they were derived is located on <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/ap42/index.html>.

**T3Q2** Is the complete data set accessible, including metadata, data-dictionaries and embedded definitions or are there confidentiality issues that may limit accessibility to the complete data set?

The national annual NEI criteria emission trends summaries, as presented in the indicator, are publicly available on <http://www.epa.gov/airtrends/econ-emissions.html>. The national annual NEI hazardous air pollutant (HAP) data for year 1999, as presented in the indicator, are publicly available on <http://www.epa.gov/air/data/index.html>. Data format information typically resides at the same location as the data itself.

**T3Q3** Are the descriptions of the study or survey design clear, complete and sufficient to enable the study or survey to be reproduced?

The EPA's documentation (see that noted in T3Q1) of how the NEI data estimates are generated will facilitate reproduction of some emission process estimates. As the EPA's documentation has evolved and improved over the years, it is expected that the more recent data years are documented in a more organized and transparent manner and would best enable reproducibility of emission estimates. Where EPA's documentation for specific years indicates that data was incorporated as that received from the state and local agencies, there is no additional documentation available by which to reproduce the state-derived values.

**T3Q4** To what extent are the procedures for quality assurance and quality control of the data documented and accessible?

Much of the data that is used to compile the NEI is gathered indirectly from multiple and numerous sources, as referenced in the estimation methods information under T1Q1. These indirect data sources are presumed to have their own QA practices. Where state-supplied emissions estimates are used for some sectors and pollutants, it is presumed that states have QA plans in most cases but EPA does not systematically obtain information on QA practices from the states. The EPA contractors who use data sources and EPA-developed emissions factors to make emissions estimates operate under general contract-wide quality assurance plans, which can be made available on request. In addition, the EPA's more recent QC practices performed during the blending and merging of data from numerous sources, are described in the 2002 NEI Preparation Plan located on <http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/2002inventory.html>.

**T4Q1** Have appropriate statistical methods been used to generalize or portray data beyond the time or spatial locations where measurements were made (e.g., statistical survey inference, no generalization is possible)?

No statistical generalization is performed to generate the national annual emissions trends presented in the indicator. The annual pollutant totals are developed at the plant or county level and then simply totaled and summarized at the regional and national levels.

**T4Q2** Are uncertainty measurements or estimates available for the indicator and/or the underlying data set?

No. At present, statistical uncertainty measures are not available for the underlying data that comprise the indicator. Most of the QA routines that are currently performed by EPA are sector data comparisons between different years or geographic areas, rather than on individual data variables. Much of the associated data variables for a specific sector are implied or not highly characterized, and therefore do not lend themselves well at present to quantitative uncertainty analysis.

**T4Q3** Do the uncertainty and variability impact the conclusions that can be inferred from the data and the utility of the indicator?

Yes, OAQPS has developed standardized procedures for quality assuring the NEI as discussed in the "2002 NEI Preparation Plan" ([http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/2002neiplan\\_081004final.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/ttn/chief/net/2002neiplan_081004final.pdf)). The procedures include use of software to facilitate and standardize review of the data by EPA regional offices and state, local and tribal agencies. During the review process, industries often closely review their emission estimates to ensure they have been correctly incorporated in the NEI. In addition, OAQPS is able to use techniques which contrast data from various sources and from several inventory years to understand variability and identify areas in need of additional review. Where several data sources are available, assessments of data quality are conducted by OAQPS to ensure use of the highest quality emissions data when developing the NEI. The sum of the review procedures used for developing the NEI is believed to yield data of sufficient quality to support the conclusions which typical users will derive from the indicators. However, for the most rigorous applications, the NEI may be used in conjunction with ambient monitoring data and air quality and source receptor models to better characterize air quality problems and thus reduce uncertainties.

**T4Q4** Are there limitations, or gaps in the data that may mislead a user about fundamental trends in the indicator over space or time period for which data are available?

The indicator represents aggregated data. Most of the data is the result of a calculation that combines an emission rate per unit of input or output and a measure of that input or output, rather than a direct measurement of emissions. All states and counties are represented in the NEI, however not all states and local agencies may provide the same data or level of detail for a given

year. State and local agencies may prioritize their data development efforts on emissions in county and metropolitan areas that are nonattainment for specific ambient air quality standards, i.e., ozone or PM<sub>2.5</sub> NAAQS. The result may be more complete and quality assured data submissions to the NEI for these areas. Where data is absent or incomplete, EPA performs some data extrapolation from previous year data or other data sources. Inference follows many processes, depending on source type, etc. To the extent possible, facility-specific or county-specific information is used. In some cases, all counties in a state are assumed to have common properties influencing emissions, for example daily low and high temperatures. Best available or at most plausible substitutes are used where needed. For example, gasoline fuel properties are not available for all counties, known fuel properties in nearby counties subject to similar regulations on gasoline are used instead. Various and not fully consistent methodologies have been used to develop the emission estimates in the NEI. This is to be expected considering the variety of organizations that have contributed the estimates.